Middle East Report ■ Spring 1999

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Satellite Television and Development in the Middle East

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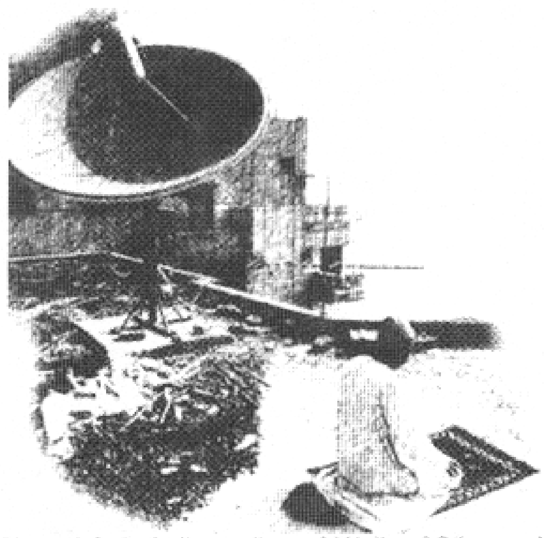

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Upon hearing a Dutch diplomat recite a dismal litany of statistics indicating the current social and economic plight of most Middle Eastern states, a Jordanian academic heaved a sigh. "This is a triple tragedy," she said. "Not only are the figures bad, but they have to be collated by foreign agencies while governments in the region keep people in the dark."

For human rights campaigners, the three tragedies are interlinked. Ideally, freedom of information should be a catalyst for all aspects of development by creating public awareness and encouraging transparent decision-making. Conversely, development should promote freedom of information by increasing the channels through which information flows. If this is the case, what are the implications of satellite television broadcasting for development in the Middle East?

Although several Arab satellite broadcasters have been operating since the early 1990s, a sudden proliferation of new ventures since 1996 has inspired hope that the vicious circle of censorship and stagnation in the region might soon be broken.

By transcending borders, satellite broadcasts are technically capable of circumventing national controls. Several channels serving Middle Eastern audiences are based outside the region.[1] A quick glance at the six leading free-to-air Arabic-language operators, however, reveals that,where free speech is concerned, ownership matters more than location . The London-based Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC) belongs to Shaikh Walid bin Ibrahim al-Ibrahim, a brother-in-law of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd. The latter is widely believed to have underwritten a large part of MBC's costs.

The Egyptian Space Channel (ESC) is part of an enormous state-run monopoly, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), while Emirates Dubai Television (EDTV) is state-owned. Of the two private Lebanese channels that expanded into satellite television at the end of 1996, one-Future TV-is part-owned by Lebanon's former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri. The second, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), is controlled by a board dominated by ministers and officials close to the Syrian government. Syrian military intelligence activities in Lebanon, in addition to the large number of Syrians currently watching Future TV and LBC, make trouble-free relations with Damascus a prerequisite for Lebanese media entrepreneurs.

If there is one exception to the rule of ownership by government or government proxy, the only candidate out of the six leading satellite broadcast channels is Al-Jazeera, based in Qatar. Officially, this is an independent station, whose "only" connection to government is that it was promised five years' worth of government loans. Unofficially, Al-Jazeera's output indicates that it has been given considerable scope. Its staff prioritize stories according to their newsworthiness, not their acceptability to local regimes,[2] and much of Al-Jazeera's material is broadcast live. Newsworthiness criteria, however, are subjective, and Al-Jazeera's criteria may well reflect the Qatari leadership's agenda for now. The paradox of Al-Jazeera's situation is that if it were wholly in the private sector its relatively independent approach might be curtailed.

Al-Jazeera's reputation for controversy while operating out of Doha rather than a European capital represents a breakthrough in media-related development in the Middle East. Along with LBC and the pay-TV provider, Orbit, Al-Jazeera has accelerated a trend towards live and compelling talk-show programming that has obliged the older channels to keep up with the competition. Social development of this sort does not stem from purely political decisions, however. The economics and technology of satellite television play a more decisive role.

A Pan-Arab Market

As the number of channels has increased, so has demand for programs. As a rule of thumb, every channel requires approximately 7,000 hours of programming per year. In the case of digital operators such as Orbit or the other Saudi-backed pay-TV company, Arab Radio and Television (ART), 7,000 hours of programs are needed for every channel in their digital "bouquet." Saudi Arabia's wireless cable system will eventually offer scores of channels; five of them were launched from scratch by MBC.

On one hand, demand on this scale has stimulated the growth of production centers in those cities where technical expertise is concentrated, notably Cairo, Beirut, Damascus and Amman. Although based in Europe, Orbit and MBC rely increasingly on studios in the Middle East, which offer cost savings. This trend encourages the independent sector and means that, with broadcasters seeking producers rather than the other way around, producers can afford to be bolder in dictating their terms.

On the other hand, the shift to indigenous program production is relatively recent, and it will take time for proper facilities to develop and expand. In the meantime, those with cash to spend on new studios are more likely to be members of the ruling establishments. One of the biggest such development projects is the vast Media Production City taking shape near Cairo, sometimes called "Hollywood on the Nile," even though it is located in the desert. Its scale can be gauged from the $550 million worth of construction work yet to be completed before 2001. On a good day there may be 2,000 people employed in the studios and other non-construction jobs on site. The project's managers, wary of being saddled with obsolete technology, have included clauses in their contract with Sony ensuring that all equipment be state-of-the-art.[3] Yet when it comes to the content of films shot at Media Production City, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union's 50 percent stake in the venture gives it ultimate editorial control.

Faced with the challenge of filling thousands of hours of airtime, television executives have limited options. Programming costs have traditionally been less prohibitive for state-sponsored broadcasters with a purely political raison d'être. State revenues are drying up, however, while media competition dictates an increasingly hard-nosed commercial approach. The combination of these economic factors militates against the commissioning of challenging documentaries or innovative dramas, and means that broadcasters will instead rely on readymade material or imports. Mexican soap operas have proved popular throughout the region. ART has bought up large quantities of old Egyptian films, and Orbit relies on programming supplied by Rupert Murdoch's Star TV.

Although advertising revenue might be expected to fill the gap, in the Middle East advertising remains woefully underdeveloped. Advertisers acknowledged the importance of satellite television by icreasing their allocations to this medium to $200 million in 1997, which was almost double the figure for 1996 and roughly two-thirds of 1997 spending on terrestrial television.[4] Yet future growth is not assured. Upon leaving office last year, the outgoing managing director of MBC, Hala Omran, said that she wished more local companies would learn to advertise since this in turn would fund media expansion.[5] If these companies are to take the plunge, however, they will require more reliable viewing figures than are currently available.

Not only are ratings in most countries compiled by unsophisticated methods, leaving analysts sceptical about their accuracy, but potential advertisers are increasingly unsure how best to target viewers because of the effects of the digital revolution. Digital technology allows satellites to transmit scores of channels where previously they could transmit only a few. Nilesat 101, launched by Egypt in April 1998, can handle over 80 television channels. The new generation of Arabsat satellites, the first of which was due for launching in early 1999, will provide even more capacity. With countless separate thematic channels for news, sport and drama alongside the numerous general interest channels, audience shares could become so fragmented that viewing preferences will be almost impossible to track.

Haves and Have-nots

Despite the ambiguities surrounding market shares, advertisers will continue to pursue audiences, thereby helping to reverse the former situation in which broadcasters decided audiences' options. The problem comes in assessing whether, in the leap from total state control to market-driven programming, Middle East satellite television will ever function as an independent public service providing outlets for investigative journalism and a widened arena for uncensored policy debates.

Egypt's government boasts of using satellite television as a public service and as a catalyst for development, but "development" in this case constitutes a one-way information flow. Nilesat is Egypt's entry ticket into what Cairo proudly calls the "space club." Official speeches highlight the spin-off benefits, such as technology transfers to local scientists and technicians, and the use of Nilesat channels for educational programming and public service programs on health.

For Egyptian families hoping to tune in to Nilesat channels for lessons, however, the minimum outlay for a digital receiver geared to free-to-air transmission is £E1, 600 ($475). Hire purchase arrangements are in hand to put the receivers within reach of ordinary people and the sales pitch is that lessons by satellite will eventually lessen the expenses of private tuition. In theory this should be attractive for parents who currently pay vast sums for after-school lessons in virtually every subject. Yet in practice, there is less demand for satellite viewing in Egypt than in other parts of the Middle East. Satellite penetration in Egypt remains under 10 percent, compared with levels of 15 to 30 percent in neighboring countries and 50 percent in parts of the Gulf.[6] Hence, most Egyptian families interested in taking advantage of Nilesat will probably still need to buy a satellite dish as well as a receiver.

Since other countries within the Nilesat footprint can also benefit from its educational service, Egypt may find itself-not for the first time-subsidising regional development. The satellite project has already cost $160 million, which will take eight years to recoup on the basis of arrangements for leasing current spare capacity. Nilesat 101 has 12 transponders, of which seven are let to foreign broadcasters,[7] each at the rate of $3 million per year. Nilesat 102, due to be launched later this year at a further cost of $140 million, will have another 12.

Advertisers' biases towards wealthy Gulf audiences must also be taken into account, especially for Egyptian and Lebanese satellite companies, whose managers are keenly aware that, in order to maximize revenues, their programs should be suitable for Gulf consumption. Sana Mansour, head of ESC, maintains that whereas terrestrial television should be attending to local issues, satellite television needs a wider focus, "Terrestrial channels can behave like an employee, complaining about things like broken pipes, but the ESC channels have to be ambassadors for Egypt."[8] Nadim Munla, chairman of Future TV, feels that his station should promote Lebanon to Gulf investors, stressing that "life is back" in Lebanon.[9] "Life" in this context means fun and entertainment, not probing interviews with Lebanese politicians. For much of 1998, Hariri's cabinet barred Lebanon's satellite channels from covering local news.

Some claim that Arab satellite channels are contributing to a renewed sense of pan-Arabness, as people all over the Arab world tune into the same programs at the same time. Broadcast executives have recognized this potential by featuring photogenic pan-Arab extravaganzas, such as sporting events, Orbit's annual song festival, and the "edu-tainment" quiz shows offered by Future-TV and MBC. Examining the rise of the press and nationalism in Europe, Benedict Anderson has argued that print-capitalism created the possibility of an "imagined community," in which individuals felt themselves to be intimately connected to millions of people they had never met.[10] Arabic-language television transcending national borders could have a comparable effect.

In deliberately reaching out to expatriate Arabs in Europe and the Americas, Arab satellite channels may also be helping to preserve ties between emigrant communities and their countries of origin. Research suggests, unsurprisingly, that first generation emigrants watch far more Arabic-language television than their offspring.[11] Nevertheless, emigrants have traditionally been a source of funds, innovation and technical expertise for the region, so anything that keeps these contacts alive could well affect future developments in the Middle East.

In the immediate future, however, prospects for uncensored news and current affairs programs on the Arab satellite channels are mixed. Neither ART nor Orbit carries any Arabic news, and Orbit has not replaced the BBC Arabic news service it axed in 1996. MBC steers clear of investigating Saudi or other contentious issues and plans in its new streamlined phase[12] to focus on entertainment rather than news. MBC executives decided early in 1998 not to pursue plans for an all-news channel. The ERTU's news output, whether on ESC or the Nilesat thematic channels, is unlikely to make waves, while ANN, although committed to news and current affairs programming, has yet to establish itself as a strong contender in the field.

As satellite programming blends in with the overall Middle East media environment, the best barometer of a changing climate for news coverage and debate-one that is more conducive to development in the region-is probably Al-Jazeera. As the end of the century approaches, the arrow on the barometer could still swing either way.

Endnotes

1 London is home to Saudi-owned MBC, Kurdish-owned MED TV and Arab News Network (ANN) owned by Syrian President Asad's nephew. The Saudi-owned pay-TV operator, Orbit, is based in Rome.

2 Al-Jazeera has caused controversy by, among other things, leading news bulletins with coverage of the illness of King Fahd.

3 Factual information on Media Production City was gathered during a visit on September 6, 1998. The number of permanent employees is approximately 350.

4 According to the Pan-Arab Research Center (PARC), data quoted in *ArabAd*, February 1998, pp. 24-26.

5 Interview with Chris Forrester in *Gulf Marketing Review*, May 1998, p. 27.

6 Figures collated from various sources, including PARC, Eutelsat, Stat-IPSOS, and Fortune Promoseven.

7 Four transponders are taken by the ERTU and the ministries of education, higher education and health. A fifth is reserved for ad hoc purposes. ART and Showtime have two each. Iraq and Libya have one each. Oman, Bahrain, Ajman and the Palestinian Authority have slots on the twelfth.

8 Interview with the author, Cairo, August 15, 1998.

9 Interview with the author, Beirut, March 26, 1998.

10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), p.46.

11 E.g., the study by Alec Hargreaves and Dalila Mahdjoub on families of Maghrebi origin in France, in *European Journal of Communication* 12/4 (December 1997).

12 MBC dismissed 120 staff members during the summer of 1998.
